



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Refuge and Policy History

Deer Flat National Wildlife Refuge



History: Lake Lowell Unit

The first European-Americans who traversed southwestern Idaho in the late 1800s found a harsh arid landscape where only about 10 inches of rain fell annually. Occasional springs supplied much needed water resources. The grasses that grew near some of these springs attracted deer and elk, and the area came to be called Deer Flat.

As Idaho was settled, private citizens attempted to irrigate farms by diverting water from rivers. By the 1900's, it became clear that providing water to all of southern Idaho was too big of a task for private irrigation companies and local citizens. So, D.W. Ross and James H. Lowell lobbied Congress to create an irrigation project in southwest Idaho. In 1905, Deer Flat (later named Lake Lowell) was chosen by the federal government as the newest site for an irrigation reservoir. Construction began on the reservoir and the New York Canal in 1906. In 1909, just three days after water was first diverted into the New York Canal from the Boise River, President Theodore Roosevelt established Deer Flat National Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge was given the purpose of providing a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife.

Lake Lowell is now one of the largest off-stream reservoirs in the American West, with the capacity to irrigate 200,000 acres of land. Lake Lowell water levels are controlled by the Board of Control through a management agreement with the Bureau of Reclamation.

History: Snake River Islands Unit

In the 1930's, America's waterfowl populations had drastically declined due to drought, over harvest, and habitat destruction. In response, President Franklin D. Roosevelt launched new efforts to preserve waterfowl habitat. In 1937, President Roosevelt designated 36 islands in the Snake River as Snake River Islands National Wildlife Refuge, with the purpose of providing habitat for waterfowl nesting. The Deer Flat and Snake River Islands National Wildlife Refuges were combined in 1963.

Today's Refuge

Today, the Refuge encompasses approximately 11,000 acres in two units — Lake Lowell and the Snake River Islands. These units, which lie within two states (Idaho and Oregon) and five counties, comprise several habitats including riparian forest, shrub steppe, open-water, freshwater marshes and cropland.

Refuge System Administration

During the 105th Congress, a bipartisan congressional coalition joined with a diverse group of nongovernmental organizations, state fish and wildlife agencies, and the Interior Department to craft the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (P.L.105-57) (Act). The Act provides significant new guidance for management and public use of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Refuge System).

The Act directs the Refuge System to be consistently managed as a national system of lands and waters devoted to wildlife conservation and management.

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

Administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and, where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Above: Waterfowl gather at the Lake Lowell Unit in fall/©Mike Shipman.

Comprehensive Conservation Plan

The Act also requires refuges to develop a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) to direct refuge management. The CCP is a management plan that establishes goals aimed at achieving the purpose of the Refuge and fulfilling the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The CCP will direct management on the Refuge for the next 15 years.

When creating a CCP, the following policies and guidance must be considered.

National Wildlife Refuge System Goals

Policies created to implement the Act identify Refuge System goals that include:

- Conserve a diversity of fish, wildlife and plants
- Develop and maintain a network of habitats
- Conserve those ecosystems, plant communities and wetlands that are unique within the United States
- Provide and enhance opportunities to participate in compatible wildlife-dependent recreation



- Help to foster the public's understanding and appreciation of the diversity of fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats

These policies also establish management priorities. In order of importance these priorities are:

- Conserve fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats
- Facilitate compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses
- Consider other appropriate and compatible uses

Wildlife-Dependent Uses

The Refuge Improvement Act declares that compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses are legitimate and appropriate priority general public uses of the Refuge System. These uses, hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography and environmental education and interpretation, receive enhanced consideration in planning and management over all other public uses of the Refuge System. When compatible, these wildlife-dependent recreational uses are to be strongly encouraged.

Appropriate Use Policy

This policy provides a standard for refuge managers to use when a refuge use is requested. It also ensures that the process refuge managers follow will be consistent. Generally, an appropriate use is one that benefits the natural or cultural resources of the Refuge or provides a better understanding of those resources.

Compatibility Policy

Wildlife-dependent and all other recreational uses must be determined to be compatible before they can be allowed on a National Wildlife Refuge. A compatible use is one which will not materially interfere with or detract from fulfillment of the Refuge System Mission or refuge purpose(s).

Biological Integrity, Diversity, and Environmental Health

This policy provides for the protection of the fish, wildlife and habitat resources found on refuges. Further, it provides refuge managers with an evaluation process to analyze a refuge and recommend the best management to prevent additional degradation of environmental conditions and, where appropriate, restore lost or severely degraded components.

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Left: Canada geese in flight/©Mike Shipman.

Below: Boating at the Lake Lowell Unit/USFWS

